

# No, It's Not Your Opinion

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*I have had so many conversations or email exchanges with students in the last few years wherein I anger them by indicating that simply saying, "This is my opinion" does not preclude a connected statement from being dead wrong. It still baffles me that some feel those four words somehow give them carte blanche to spout [wacky] oratory or prose. And it really scares me that some of those students think education that challenges their ideas is equivalent to an attack on their beliefs.*

**I spend far more time arguing on the Internet than can possibly be healthy, and the word I've come to loath more than any other is "opinion".** Opinion, or worse "belief", has become the shield of every poorly-conceived notion that worms its way onto social media.

There's a common conception that an opinion cannot be wrong. My dad said it. Heck, everyone's dad probably said it and in the strictest terms it is true. However, before you crouch behind your Shield of Opinion, you need to ask yourself two questions.

**1. Is this actually an opinion?**

the first category of opinions that Professor Stokes talks about

**2. If it is an opinion, how informed is it and why do I hold it?**

I'll help you with the first part. **An opinion is a preference for or judgment of something.** My favorite color is black. I think mint tastes awful. *Doctor Who* is the best television show. These are all opinions. They may be unique to me alone or massively shared across the general population but **they all have one thing in common; they cannot be verified outside of the fact that I believe them.**

the second category of opinions that Professor Stokes talks about

There's nothing wrong with an opinion on those things. The problem comes from people whose **opinions are actually misconceptions.** If you think vaccines cause autism you are expressing something factually wrong, not an opinion. The fact that you may still believe that vaccines cause autism does not move your misconception into the realm of valid opinion. Nor does the fact that many others share this opinion give it any more validity.

To quote [John Oliver](#), who on his show *Last Week Tonight* referenced a [Gallup poll](#) showing one in four Americans believe climate change isn't real:

You don't need people's opinion on a fact. You might as well have a poll asking: "Which number is bigger, 15 or 5?" or "Do owls exist?" or "Are there hats?"

Yes, sometimes scientific or historical data are wrong or unclear or in need of further examination. Here, opinion can be a placeholder for a greater understanding assuming there ever is a greater understanding. There is no verification; it can only be guessed at. Hopefully in an educated manner.

That's where the second question comes in; is your opinion informed and why do you believe it? Though technically these opinions cannot be wrong they can be lacking in worth simply because they are lacking in evidence.

Here's an example. Let's say I meet a fellow *Doctor Who* fan, and this fan's favorite Doctor is David Tennant. Nothing wrong so far. However, upon further discussing the subject this fan tells me that he or she has never seen any of the pre-2005 episodes or heard any of the radio plays. Now, it's possible that even if he or she had done so that David Tennant would still be his or her favorite Doctor, but it's also possible that it would be Tom Baker or Paul McGann or someone else.

In a perfect world someone confronted with this would simply say, "Well, David Tennant is my favorite that I've seen." There's plenty of reasons to not have seen any older *Doctor Who* episodes. It's not all on Netflix, there's a lot of it, radio plays can get rather expensive, etc. Having reached a narrow opinion from a narrow set of information is only natural.

What mucks it all up is when a narrow set of information is assumed to be

wider than it is. There is a difference between a belief and things you just didn't know.

In other words, you can form an opinion in a bubble, and for the first couple of decades of our lives we all do. However, eventually you are going to venture out into the world and find that what you thought was an informed opinion was actually just a tiny thought based on little data and your feelings. Many, many, many of your opinions will turn out to be uninformed or just flat out wrong. No, the fact that you believed it doesn't make it any more valid or worthwhile, and nobody owes your viewpoint any respect simply because it is yours.